Nikolai Aleksandrovich Rozhkov (1868-1927): historian and revolutionary

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NOTE

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Conclusion
Conclusion

How long
Do works endure? As long
As they are not completed.
Since as long as they demand effort
They do not decay.

Never go forward without going
Back first to check the direction.

Bertolt Brecht

my conscience tells me ... that the work of one who digs dung is also necessary for the future temple.

V.G. Korolenko

There have been too many studies of Russian history that focus on the winners. The “leading players” such as Lenin and Stalin have had centre stage for far too long. In investigating late imperial and early Soviet historiography, at least, it is impossible to continue ignoring the “losers”. To do so would mean to continue oversimplifying and distorting the complex play of ideas that undoubtedly comprised this aspect of history. By casting a spotlight on historians like Rozhkov, who do not represent the “commanding heights” in the field of Russian history, it is possible to obtain a better understanding of the general development of Russian and

Rozhkov was a thinker who saw himself as struggling to bring light to the complex tale of the evolution of human society. He developed his version of a scientific history, drawing upon the rich heritage of Comtean positivism. It was his historical laws that enabled him to organise the mass of primary material unearthed in his years of hard work researching the history of Russia and the world. Like any good scientist, Rozhkov aimed at presenting his conclusions in the simplest possible form and, as he saw it, his laws served that purpose.

Rozhkov believed that his positivist project was moving the writing of Russian history into a new modern era. For him, the science of history was due to make the same spectacular progress that had occurred in the natural sciences. To this end, Rozhkov took up the Kliuchevskian challenge of discovering laws of historical development. It cannot be denied that Rozhkov produced some intriguing hypotheses.

His major works are fine monuments to the debate over the relationship between sociology and history. Rozhkov tried to determine the function of scientific theory in the study of human societies. This debate was
and continues to be a controversy that enlists the passions as well as the reasoning power of all involved. For Rozhkov, it was a necessary tactic to claim more for his scientific history than it could possibly deliver. By emphasising the applicability of Comtean sociological theory to history, Rozhkov thought he was not only continuing the Kliuchevskian tradition but he believed that he was placing history on a path that would take it to new heights. Rozhkov's history provides us with an entry into a very important debate and contributes to our understanding of Russian thought at the turn of the century.

The positivist sociological scheme that Rozhkov formulated was interesting and he applied it to his history with gusto and energy. Rozhkov attempted to marry his empirical research with his theoretical scheme. He was not always successful in this venture but no one could deny that Rozhkov did a great deal of important primary research with the aim of proving his claims about Russia's social evolution. Moreover, Rozhkov's theorising represented a pioneering attempt to analyse Russia's backwardness in a simple and clear manner. Rozhkov's conviction that Russia was some

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three hundred years behind the advanced countries of western Europe and that it had to undergo a further period of capitalist development, shaped his analysis of contemporary politics and led him to Menshevism.

Rozhkov's view of historical development asserted that every society progressed through the same stages. In his sociological laws, he assumed a rigid determinism. He omitted from his writings the possibility that the same sort of phenomenon can be "caused" in differing historical contexts by different agencies. His effort to unite history and sociology was conditioned by the fallacy that no other variables could have developed to change the pattern or sequence of historical development.

Rozhkov contended that all societies progressed from a natural economy to a money economy. The first period of every society was characterised by the predominance of extractive industries. People lived in primitive conditions and lacked any sophisticated notions about society, politics and culture. As societies progressed, they become more complex and less homogenous. It is now unfashionable to believe that societies evolved in this manner. However, this does not mean that we should regard Rozhkov's search for regularity and laws in history as a useless and uninteresting project.
It is unrealistic to expect that a historian writing over half a century ago and whose career spanned over three decades of tremendous social and political upheaval should write history free of mistakes. In all probability, Kiev Rus' was not a society founded on the predominance of extractive industries. Moreover, extractive industries are not necessarily the first stage in the development of human society.\(^3\) Rozhkov did make mistakes in theory and he was sometimes guilty of simplistic statements. This does not mean that Rozhkov should be taken less seriously as a historian. He should not be criticised too harshly for failing to meet the standards of present-day historians. Rozhkov saw himself as a pioneer, recognising that his sociological theory of history was a first effort and not likely to be the last word on the subject. Rozhkov should be credited for attempting a bold synthesis of contemporary knowledge in diverse fields including economics, sociology and psychology.

Rozhkov was a man of his times and certainly not alone among European historians of his generation who were attracted to positivism. It is interesting to compare the careers of Rozhkov and his celebrated contemporary, Pokrovskii. Both were students of Kliuchevskii and both were influenced by positivist thought, especially in their formative years. Pokrovskii

maintained his allegiance to Bolshevism. At the same time, he managed to blend his positivism so successfully with Marxism that few visible traces of his earlier philosophical position remained. As a result, he was to be fêted as the doyen of Soviet historians during the first decade of Soviet rule. Rozhkov, by contrast, was on the losing side in the 1917 Revolution both as a Menshevik and as a positivist, each condemned as an anti-Marxist position by the victorious Bolsheviks.

Rozhkov was simply too unorthodox ever to be fully accepted in the pantheon of Soviet Marxist historians. He did not see class and class struggle as playing a significant role in human history. He advocated a gradual transition to socialism, condemning socialists who toyed with the idea of forcing the pace of historical evolution. Rozhkov even believed that capitalism could be civilised and that this was the stage of history that was unfolding in the Europe of his day. Rozhkov's message is more likely to gain acceptance in the Russia of the 1990s than it was to find support in the revolutionary maelstrom of the early Soviet period.

Given the present fascination that Russian writers have for the losers of 1917, it is quite likely that Rozhkov and his work may resurface. Researchers will find in Rozhkov a historian who represented an alternative to the Soviet Marxism that emerged after 1917. At the same time, Rozhkov's writings are ample evidence that a rethinking about the role of positivist
thought among Russian intellectuals of the late imperial and early Soviet period is long overdue.